



Formless house (Alvar Aalto)

Tyranny of Structurelessness

As she tells us at the beginning of the attached document, the first version of Jo Freeman's "Tyranny of Structurelessness" was given as a talk more than 40 years ago, in 1970.

Part of its instant appeal is that it states "the obvious", i.e. things that those of us with even a small amount of experience know very well to be true. For example:

"...there is no such thing as a structureless group."

Not only is this obvious, but it is also part of scientific knowledge of human society. Humans are social creatures, and live their lives in relation with each other. These relationships always have structure, although the structure of the relationships is constantly changing.

If, as Spinoza and Engels thought, freedom is "the recognition

of necessity”, then freedom of relationships, and within relationships, will be greater if their structure is acknowledged, and not denied.

If, as Gramsci thought, all social groups contain their “organic intellectuals”, then some of these may be good and others bad. But the remedy for bad intellectuals is not to pretend that there are no intellectuals. They are there, whether people are conscious of them, or not.

What Jo Freeman shows is that “structurelessness”, as applied in the Women’s Movement, became a screen behind which women who had advantages of class privilege, derived from the generally class-divided society outside, were able to manipulate the other, poorer and working-class women, so as to preserve their hegemony or dictatorship within these feminist circles.

“For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group and to participate in its activities the structure must be explicit, not implicit,” says Freeman.

Explicit structure means open Rules of Debate, Procedure of Meetings (“Standing Orders”) including notice of meetings, a Constitution, listed membership, minutes, book-keeping, and election of leadership on a periodical basis.

In South Africa, a “Progressive Women’s Movement” (PWM) exists which has no formal structure. Its “Base Document” (not a constitution) says that it is “Organic – not a formal structure”. In practice this means that its decisions are taken

by its sponsors, who fund its principal gatherings, and by those who maintain it from outside itself. This maintenance is done by the ANC Women's League.

The first, three-paragraph section of Jo Freeman's essay, called "Formal and Informal Structures", is the best of the four sections. It "says it all". The next three sections are more experiential and discursive. The final section gives some advice on organisation, and one may have different views about the details.

The main thing is that organisation is essential for the working-class women, and for the working class in general. "Organise or starve!" is a good slogan.

In South Africa, the great age of organisation was from the beginning of the 20th century and especially from the founding of the ANC in 1912, up until 1990.

The organisations that still flourish were founded then. Of them, the ANC and the SACP continued to grow in the first decade of the 21st century, but COSATU did not grow at the same rate.

In 2003, COSATU adopted its "2015 Plan", which called for four million members by the time of the 10th COSATU Congress, held in 2009. In fact, the membership at that time had barely reached 2 million, and it was very little changed by the time of the 11th COSATU Congress, which took place three years later in September, 2012. In 2015, NUMSA was expelled

from COSATU for poaching members from other unions.

On the other hand, since 1990, a large number of NGOs have been established, which, calling themselves “civil society”, or “social movements”, hold themselves out as the new representatives of the masses – whereas they only represent their bourgeois funders and sponsors.

Internationally, the recent “Occupy” movement was not the first to shoot up on the stony ground of “structurelessness”, only to die away even faster.

What Jo Freeman said, addressing the Women’s Movement forty years or more ago, remains today applicable to all of our activities, and not just to the Women’s Movement.

Conversely, it is clear that much (but not all) of the ideology of the Women’s Movement is only masquerading as feminism, whereas it is actually imported from, and is no different from, the prevailing bourgeois ideology of capitalist society. This is certainly the case with “structurelessness”.

“Structurelessness” has nothing to do with feminism, and everything to do with degenerate “post-modern”, anti-humanist bourgeois philosophy in the service of Imperialism.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Tyranny of Structurelessness, Jo Freeman, 1973.](#)
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